

## **How the campaign to stop a new Nantes Airport became one of the most successful in history**

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**Outside London where I live, Brussels where I sometimes lobby – and maybe Brighton where I escape to for a day out – there is no place I’ve been to more often over the last decade than Nantes in West France.**

Earlier this week the Macron Government announced that it was dropping plans for a new airport about 15 miles outside Nantes close to the village of Notre-Dames-des-Landes. The scale of what local campaigners have achieved cannot be overstated.

**Whether or not you support their cause, the way the Nantes community built up their campaign has lessons for campaigners, whatever their issue, everywhere.**

I first became aware of the airport proposal when five French farmers joined our ‘No Third Runway’ rally in London in 2008. That summer I went to Nantes for the first time. I found a pretty small campaign uncertain how to proceed; and, in particular, unsure how to get the voice of farmers and villagers from an unfashionable part of France heard on the national stage.

**Theirs is the remarkable story of turning a small, rural campaign into one of the biggest environmental movements in Europe.**

They took some early inspiration from the successful campaign in London to stop a third runway. An account of that campaign which I had put together was translated into French.

Their campaign, going back decades, was rooted in the radical French ‘peasant farmers’ movement. The farmers were joined by local people fearful of the way the new airport would blight their lives and by climate campaigners.

They adopted strategies used in the Heathrow campaign: building a broad coalition; organizing pro-active, high-profile stunts and demonstrations; challenging the economic justification for the airport. They commissioned their own independent study from the Dutch consultants CE Delft – the same people we had used at Heathrow – which questioned the economic case for the airport. They used the courts.

They were joined by direct action activists who set up home in Le Zad on part of the land that would be required for the new airport.

The campaigners made links across France and established support “committees” in 200 towns in Belgium and France. These support groups did demonstrations in their own areas in support of the Nantes campaigners. And each July up to 40,000 people would descend upon this tranquil part of rural France to show their solidarity during the annual protest weekend. It was an awesome experience addressing crowds of this size on the occasions I was asked to speak.

Interestingly, though, the Nantes campaigners had little support from campaign groups around other French airports. A number of these groups backed the building of the airport. They felt a new 2-runway airport outside Nantes would eliminate the noise experienced by Nantes residents from the existing one runway airport (which would have closed). But it was also believed that a new international airport in the West of France would relieve pressure on Charles de Gaulle and Orly airports in Paris where residents were suffering badly from an ever-increasing number of flights.

**The regional government based in Nantes and the national Government in Paris had for decades strongly backed a new Nantes Airport.** The exact reasons why they were so determined to build it were never clear. The existing airport was far from full. But the economic regeneration and extra jobs that the new airport might have brought to the area attracted support from many local politicians. The argument that France needed another airport to take the burden off Paris had some support at a national level. But many of the airport's opponents felt that the new airport was little more than a prestige project for local politicians. Certainly, there was nothing like the pressure of demand that there is in somewhere like SE England today.

The campaign always had radical roots because it came out of the French 'peasant' movement. But, even so, in the early days there were tensions between the local people and Le Zad activists.

That changed – in fact a huge amount changed – during the winter of 2012/13 when there were tear-gas battles in the woods as police fought to remove hundreds of the activists who had set up make-shift homes in support of the local community. The courage of Le Zad protestors as they resisted the police in the bitter winter cold and driving rain both cemented their support in the local community and highlighted their struggle more widely.

Earlier in 2012, during the presidential election, four local farmers staged a 28-day hunger strike against the plan to evict them from their properties. A number of the presidential hopefuls came to visit these men, some of them quite elderly. These images of ordinary people defending the land their families had farmed for generations caught the imagination of France and beyond.

**A key feature of the campaign was spectacular stunts and demonstrations, often headed up by the convoy of tractors.** Hundreds of people riding bicycles and on tractors spent a weekend on the road as they headed for a huge rally in Paris. I spotted them easily when I joined them. Their animals were heading their march through the elegant boulevards of the French capital!

In early 2014 up to 60,000 people took part in a demonstration in Nantes. While predominantly peaceful, it ended in violence with parts of the city set ablaze as a small number of activists fought running battles with the police. This exacerbated the tension between many of the local people and the activists.

By 2017 many of those tensions had been resolved. The Hollande Government had held a regional referendum where, by a small majority, the area voted to back the new runway. Once more it looked as if the campaigners had lost the battle. But the French Government was fearful what would happen if they went in to try to clear the land. They knew that tens of thousands of people would descend on it from all over Europe. As one regional councilor put it: "Quite simply, if they try to build the airport, there will be uprisings across France. The reaction to both the hunger strike and the resistance in the woods means it will be very hard for the authorities to go-ahead with the airport."

Macron, a much more astute figure than Hollande, bowed to the inevitable and dropped the project. The campaigners had given him a way out by making the case that more growth at the existing Nantes Airport would cater satisfactorily for the projected demand in the region and should be pursued instead of the new airport.

Macron had set up a small team to look at the arguments for both airports. They didn't really come to a firm conclusion but provided a useful device for Macron to drop the new runway but still save face.

The campaigners had secured a famous victory.

**As I see it the key ingredients were:**

- They were strongly motivated
- They understood they had to make this a national issue
- They made a well-researched economic case against the new runway
- They staged high-profile, visually exciting, dramatic and daring events
- They built up a nation-wide – and ultimately Europe-wide – coalition of support
- They understood the value of local communities linking up with direct action activists
- They kept on going over many years
- They gave the Government an alternative option.

**I am certain that a number of the residents impacted by the existing airport will not be at all happy with the decision. Equally, there will be unhappiness amongst many heavily overflown by the Paris airports. There are real issues to be explored there – maybe subject for another blog. This blog was simply to highlight the factors which made the fight against the Notre-Dames-des-Landes Airport one of the most impressive campaigns there has ever been.**

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(Highlights, footnotes and minor edits may have been added, but only for context, analysis & clarification)